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The Price of Intelligence Failures

Recent news reports concerning widespread rioting in Iran spurred by opposition to continued rule by the shah, once again are serving to point out that, despite the billions of dollars spent by the United States every year in pursuit of intelligence, our intelligence agencies have repeatedly failed to perceive at an early time major world events and trends. In the fall of 1975, the House Select Committee on Intelligence (the Pike committee) held a number of public hearings on intelligence failure, including, notably, the communist rise to power in Portugal, wherein our intelligence personnel simply ignored grass-roots disfavor with the prevailing regime. The parallel to the most recent intelligence failure in Iran is obvious.

The U.S. intelligence community, the Congress and the media were quick to condemn the leaking of the Pike committee's draft report and publication in the Village Voice subsequent to the House's vote to suppress it. As is the case with any leak, concern was vented, not over the contents of the report, which in part discussed in detail various U.S. intelligence failures, but with the method of its having been made public.

The upshot is that, despite the high priority placed on intelligence gathering, intelligence failures continue and bear drastic consequences for the United States in its foreign policies and, in the case of Iran and oil imports, its domestic policies. Now we are faced with the potential toppling of a regime in which we have invested heavily, armed to the teeth, and relied upon for oil imports and resistance to Soviet expansion. U.S. foreign policy has thus fostered a self deception, by which we have relied to our detriment on a facade of our own creation—that of Iranian political stability.

The unfortunate lesson of this entire experience is that nothing ever really changes. Intelligence is gathered in a faulty manner, distorted for political purposes or simply ignored. Instead of howling over what ultimately has constituted an inconsequential leak of a draft report, U.S. intelligence agencies should have taken the findings of the Pike committee to heart. In that they obviously have not done so, the American taxpayers continue to spend billions of dollars for false, distorted or ignored intelligence, when no intelligence would cost nothing.

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